

STATEMENT OF  
HONORABLE BILL SHUSTER (PA-09)

BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS  
HOUSE VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

June 24, 2015

Chairman Abraham, Ranking Member Titus and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for allowing me to testify today on behalf of my bill H.R. 1338, the Dignified Interment of Our Veterans Act of 2015.

The issue of unclaimed veteran remains was first brought to my attention by two dedicated community servants from my district, Mr. Lanny Golden and Mr. Ron Metros. They catapulted my awareness of the tragic state of thousands of veteran remains and the important work being done by selfless volunteers associated with organizations like the Missing in America Project whose mission it is to locate, identify, and inter the unclaimed remains of American veterans.

The Dignified Burial and Other Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act of 2012 placed shared responsibility on the Veteran Affairs Administration, veteran service organizations, and funeral directors to identify the veteran status of the deceased and make every effort to locate the next of kin. Despite the best efforts of these agencies, it is estimated that 47,000 unclaimed, uninterred veteran cremains remain on shelves collecting dust. The Pennsylvania State Coordinator for the Missing in America Project, who is also a licensed funeral director, estimates he has interred more than 125 unclaimed cremains from Western Pennsylvania in the last three years. We can speculate regarding the reason for this epidemic but we cannot know for sure without giving this issue the attention it deserves.

In order to help address this problem, I introduced legislation that requires the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to conduct a study on matters relating to claiming and interring of unclaimed veteran remains. The intent of the study is to confirm the scope of this problem, uncover any barriers associated with claiming and interring veteran remains, and solicit recommendations from the Department of Veterans Affairs on potential program improvements. This is the first step in fixing this issue and bringing honor back to our fallen heroes.

I would be remiss if I didn't highlight efforts by the Department of Veterans Affairs National Cemetery Administration to bolster outreach efforts over the last year and their implementation of

new tracking protocols that ensure claimed veterans are interred within a timely manner. I'm confident they'll apply the same level of vigor in finding solutions to the obstacles that have yet to be uncovered.

Lastly, I would like to say thank you to all who have served this great nation and ensure that your final resting place be of dignity and honor. We will not forget you.